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**The Popular Opinion within Germany on The European Union:**

**From the Rise to the Decline**

Since the establishment of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, hopes were held high and so were the heads of European Union’s leaders. The creation of a new currency, the Euro, was celebrated akin to the Fourth of July in the United States. This economic unity signified a coalition of peace and togetherness that was tremendously appealing to the war-weary European countries. This concept of a single Europe introduced by the Maastricht Treaty seemed impossible, but after landmark events like WWII and The Élysée Treaty increased the possibility for a unified Europe. Suddenly an opportunity was created for an entire region to be brought together in unison to decrease conflict and improve economic stability. Germany and France took the reins in the initiation of the European Union (EU), contributing more to its creation than any other country. In the early planning stages for this utopian-esque integration, problems along the way were to be expected, however the massive sovereign debt crisis and the possible dissolution of the Euro that ensued, were not. When the blueprints were constructed, Jacques Delores and Pascal Lamy, the EU’s attributed founders, did not anticipate such a large scale failure on the horizon. The EU began as a groundbreaking idea that would give the countries within the union an added competitive edge in the global market by increasing their political and economic strength. Consequently, its rocky existence has made many extremely uncertain of its true sustainability.

In this paper I will investigate how the German popular opinion of the European Union has fluctuated before and after onset of the Euro Crisis in late 2008. In doing so, I will utilize German public opinion surveys taken during three specific time periods that marked significant turning points in the development of the EU: the planning and early implementation stages of the EU in the 1990s, data from October 2009-2010 when the earliest signals of the Euro Crisis began to appear, and from 2010-present. Given that large numbers of statistical databases that archive popular opinion of the EU are funded by different organizations, some disparities exist and allow data to be susceptible to bias. In order to fully understand the shifts in optimism or pessimism on issues concerning the future of Europe and the EU it is necessary to understand the watershed events and economic indicators during the time.

*Germany and popular opinion of the EU in 1990’s:*

Germany in the 1990s was a decade filled with contradicting events that teetered the popular opinion up and down. For example, German citizens experienced an above average unemployment rate of 10.8% in 1990 (CIA World Fact Book). Obviously, this negative economic indicator portrays a markedly high number of unemployed. However, in the same year German citizens also witnessed the landmark event of the unification of East and West Germany in October of 1990. The atmosphere was buzzing with excitement and hope when The Berlin Wall was torn down. At this point, the solidarity and stability from an entire European integration appeared to be in the cross hairs and popular opinion reflected this accordingly. The Eurobarometer in1990 concluded that: “EC citizens believed that the Community was moving more quickly towards unification than in 1986 and 1987” (European Commission Public Polls). This progress and geopolitical restructuring symbolized a realistic promise of a new beginning for the German people.

Less than two years later on February 7th, 1992, the Maastricht Treaty was signed transforming The European Community (EC) into The European Union. During this decade German Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) was in office and assigned his country to the role of ‘paymaster’ of the EU. Germany was proud, confident, and economically successful. As the strongest economy in Europe they felt powerful and able to undertake the additional burden of contributing the most to the EU’s financial quotas. Although contributing more economically would burden Germany it also rewarded more representation in The Council of the European Union. However, as time progressed popular opinion of Germans and their role as ‘paymaster’ underwent heavy scrutiny.

*Germany and the popular opinion of the EU in 2009-2010:*

The election of the Prime Minister of Greece, Georgiou Papandreou, in October of 2009 signaled the onset of the Euro Crisis. Soon after taking to office, he allowed for the much higher calculation of Greek national debt to be exposed to the world. This event was the beginning of a slippery-slope-financial-panic that impacted all members of the EU and its trade partners. When the US-based Standard and Poor’s Company began lowering Greece’s credit rating and enormous bond-brokers began disinvesting in EU-members the popular opinion on the EU inevitably shifted. From November 2009 to June 2010, the percent of Germans who believed that their country benefited from being a member of a common market decreased from 57% to 48% (European Commission Public Polls). Despite the 9% decrease seeming meager in the bigger picture, in reality it was the largest drop in over 5 years. Yet, this wasn’t the first event that led to German distrust of the new currency and union.

The unemployment rate in Germany in 2005 had risen to the record level of 11.7%(CIA World Fact Book). Barely over a decade after the Maastricht Treaty was signed, the glamor of one Europe and one currency faded with rise of statistics like this. Soon enough Germans began to wonder why more than 35% of the EU budget was being allocated to ‘less-favoured regions’ (Europa: Official Website of the EU).

*Germany and the popular opinion on the EU from 2011-present:*

During this time frame German people witnessed the EU leaders agreeing on a 500€ billion bailout package, numerous financial service companies decreasing members’ credit ratings, income tax levels rising to cover deficits, and Greek politicians being forced to adopt austerity measures and being cast onto the hot seat (The Wall Street Journal). The previous German trust and confidence of The Council of the European Union dwindled as those who were granted membership on false premises began to pull down the entire operation.

Conversely, in March 2011 The Euro-Plus-Pact was founded. This pact called for measures such as: fiscal consolidation and structural reform to address member deficits, labor market reform to address unemployment rates, and mandated presentation on consolidation plans to oversee credible improvement (The European Council). In addition, on April of 2011 the unemployment rate was recorded at 7.1%, showing a .7% *decrease* from April of 2010 (NY Times Ewing). According to the New York Times: “the figures provide some of the strongest evidence yet of the comeback of Europe’s largest economy” (NY Times Ewing). Unemployment is highlighted because of its connection with an individuals’ satisfaction with life, which is in turn represented on opinions in categories like trust in government institutions and also reflect ratings on economic stability. Synchronized with the unemployment decrease, the Eurobarometer published in 2011 that pessimism of the future is decreasing overall and confirms a positive trend of German sentiments towards the European Union.

*Conclusion:*

Through this analysis it becomes apparent that the overall approval of the European Union took a hit immediately after the start of the sovereign debt crisis. German people have a deep-seated fear of financial troubles through experiences like the hyperinflation of the mid-1920s, and similarly they harbor a fear of demagogues or radical political parties rising to power in the wake of WWII. The fear of repetition of these histories was quelled with the idea of a new beginning that accompanied a long list of promises offered by the EU. Germany, being sensitive to these episodes, was drastically influenced in public opinion polls before and after the Euro Crisis. Just as we are able to interpret the factors for sharp changes in political parties’ popularity from 1919-1933 in Germany, these popular opinion surveys offer the same medium. After the hyperinflation of the mid-1920s, during which the Socialist Party (SPD) ruled, the preceding election cycle shows that German voters clung to the Nazi Party (NSDAP). The NSDAP represented change and escape from the economic turmoil that marred the approval ratings of the SPD. All the while the radicals rose in power, the SPD and other conservative and liberal parties who were majorly in charge during inflation were now majorly to blame. Analogously, the public opinion polls of Germany on the EU presented in this investigation are closely correlated to the economic and political policies/events that convergence represented. It can be foreseen and supported that Germans approved more of the EU until it encountered problems. Nevertheless, these are correlations and do not represent concrete reasons for causation.

The Eurobarometer and other statistical data measure the German peoples’ approval towards EU differently. As Roth and Gros argued in the article “*Do Germans Support the Euro?*” simple changes in diction may lead to bias results:

“The Allensbach Institute and Eurobarometer were measuring different concepts: *trust* in the euro and *support* for the euro, respectively; b) the Allensbach Institute’s results might be biased, given the scaling of their trust question and c) the fact that Eurobarometer frames its survey questions explicitly in a European context” (Roth and Gros 1).

Through this, one can see there is a wide array of factors influencing the positive or negative outcomes of Germans’ popular opinion concerning the EU. In the process of weeding out ones with high statistical significance it is important to obtain a rounded historical perspective and use multiple sources. Although it is true correlation does not equal causation, statistical data serves as a valuable tool in deciphering the Germans’ outlook on European integration with respect to ongoing developments. Furthermore, it is crucial to have a grasp on the frame in which an opinion is subjected to since the inclusion or exclusion of small details can create two opposing ideologies.

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